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THE FLOWER-SLIPPERS OF VENUS

BY LENNIE GREENLEE

Illustrated from photographs of natural flowers by Pitcher and Manda.

ALTHOUGH they deign to draw sustenance directly from the earth, the flowers of many terrestrial orchids are as ethereal in appearance as the daintier flowery varieties that feed only upon dew and air. The stout stem that binds them together, the fringed flowers of some of the *habenarias*, or rein-orchids, and the *spiranthes*, or ladies'-tresses, might almost float away in the air like dandelion-down.

The largest and best known family of all, however, the Venus-slippers, or *cypripediums*, are of more substantial texture. Though made upon a very diminutive fairy "last" these slippers are of very good "make" indeed, enduring sometimes for five or six weeks in a quite presentable condition, after they have been cut and placed in water. A speculative examination of her slippers would lead one to suspect that Venus's foot would no longer be considered the standard of beauty for that member, judged by modern ideas. It could never have been worn as a weapon, like the dagger-pointed shoe of nowadays. But contemplate the comfort of it, ye maids! and you, also, messieurs the bachelors! Plenty of room here for the cramped toes to spread; not even a "common-sense" heel; and long wide laces that free the mind from

all anxiety as to fickle and fleeting buttons.

A very sensible myth was that of the goddess Venus, truly; and when, after her nap under the trees at the edge of the meadow, she soared away skyward, her leaving her jewel-like shoe behind may have been as a pattern for us rather than the piece of forgetfulness we charge her with. Would that our maids and mesdames might receive it so! In poor humanity's shoes, at present, only the wooden sabots of the rosy-faced Hollanders, and the stealthy, beaded moccasins of the Indian, suggest their shape. It should not be forgotten, indeed, that this resemblance has already been noted, for in the United States the *cypripediums* are often known popularly as moccasin-plants, moccasin-flowers and Indian-shoes.

Another pretty fable must



A VENUS-SLIPPER WITH LONG LACES: *CYPRIPEDIUM*
DOMINIANUM

needs be invented for that large branch of the cypripedium family which, in its tropical home, grows high in the air. This, let us conveniently suppose, was some other slipper, worn on state occasions, that Venus let fall in the tree-tops, for even divine laces may be supposed to be treacherous sometimes, and the goddess

may, perhaps, have been as careless of them as the modern maidens of hair-pins. We have come to regard even these tree-top cypripeds as terrestrial orchids, because

the majority of them can be grown in pots of peat and moss or loam, the only sure dividing line that lay cultivators know, between the epiphytal "flowers of the air" and the "flowers of the earth."

Many genera of orchids are so bewilderingly divergent in some varieties, and so alike in really different species, that, as with a number of *lælias* and *cattleyas*, they can be distinguished only by the pollen-masses; but the flower of any cypriped can be told at a glance from those of any other genus by its curious shape. There are two sepals, forming the outer envelope of the flower, when it is rolled up in its cunning, curious, club-shaped bud at the top of its stiff, dark, fuzzy stem. As the flower opens the lower sepal is concealed beneath the large pouch which forms the toe of the slipper.



CYPRIPEDIUM MASEREELIANUM



THE COMMONEST SLIPPER-ORCHID: CYPRIPEDIUM INSIGNE



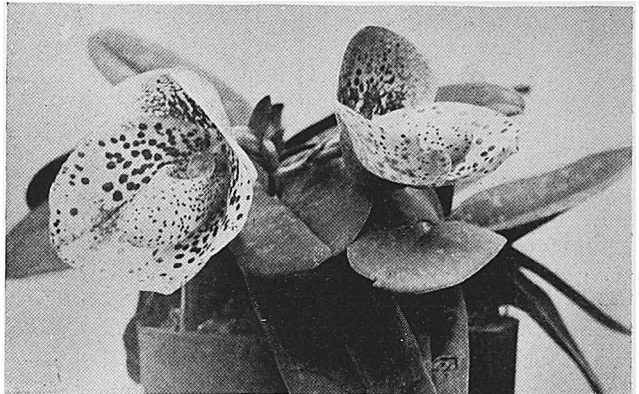
CYPRIPEDIUM ALBO-PURPUREUM: WHITE AND CRIMSON

The upper or dorsal sepal spreads itself above the pouch, and is usually quite large and brightly colored. The two petals, one on each side, are drooping spirals, sometimes short, sometimes long, growing two inches or more in a day. They form the "laces" of the fairy slipper. Some of the petals of cypripedium have been found to measure thirty inches in length.

The Venus-slippers, like all flowers, class themselves into congenial groups. The first and larger of these groups is scattered widely over tropical Asia, where the most casual observer would note the broad, rounded character of its foliage; while the leaves of the South American, or selenipedium clique, are long, narrow

and pointed. In the third branch of the family are found the Venus-slippers of our north-temperate zone, which possess tall stems that last only a year, though the root is perennial, such as the showy "spectabile," the rose-pink "acaule," and the yellow "pubescens" of May and June.

Although the thick, shining leaves of all cypripediums are quite handsome, some of the species in the first group, as *Cypripedium Lawrenceanum*, and *Cypripedium Hookeræ*, have foliage beautifully checkered with cream, white, or brown. Many of them have shown themselves so willing to grow under even adverse circumstances, that their culture is now being attempted with considerable success even in ordinary window-boxes. The favorite among them, the brightest, freest of bloom, and most easily cultivated one, seems to be the fine sturdy old *Cypripedium insigne*, which produces radiant flowers of sunshiny yellow, white, and brown. In the introduction of one of its hybrids, the beautiful variety *Spicerianum*, there is a good example of the fluctuation of prices in



CYPRIPEDIUM BELLATULUM

orchids, in regard to which I find the following interesting note:

"A few years ago, a piece of what was supposed to be the golden *Cypripedium insigne* was sent from British India to an Englishman; but on flowering, it proved to be altogether the brightest of Venus-slippers, with a distinct and distinguished air which made every orchid-fancier eager to secure it. Meanwhile, an alert collector had discovered its haunt, and after a

four weeks' race with a rival from Calcutta to Manipur, he gathered some thousands of plants from

the faces of the cliffs whereon they grew, and sent them to London. In January a plant of this *cypripedium*, variety *Spicerianum*, commanded \$1,250; in May plants were sold at auction for fifty cents."

Had the price of this orchid depended upon the increase of the one plant first imported, very few of us could, even yet, afford to enjoy its lovely flowers. A vigorous *cypripedium*, if it exerts its

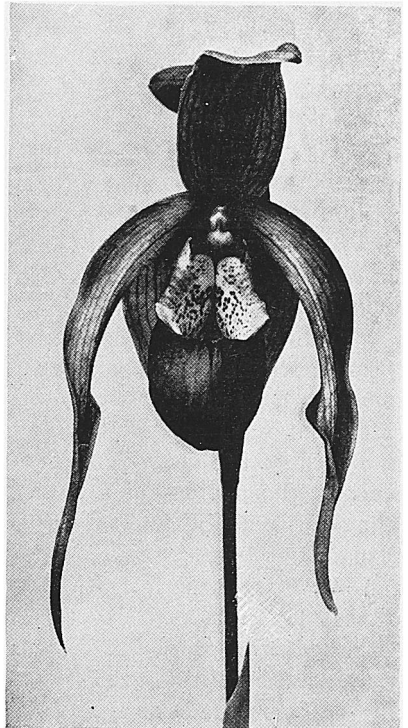


CYPRIPEDIUM MAGNIFLORUM.

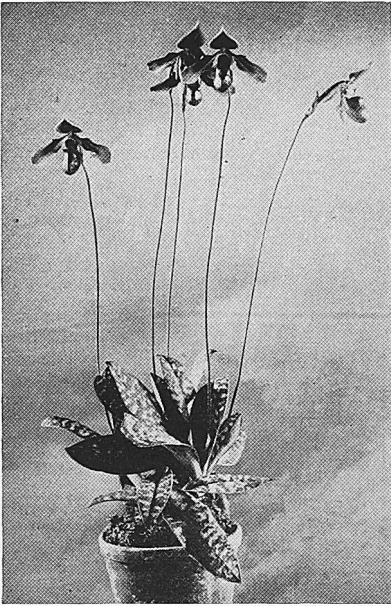
self, may in a year grow large enough to be separated into two or three plants, but this is too high a rate of increase to be commonly expected from such an aristocratic, leisurely-going family as this is. From seeds produced by hybridizing, *cypripediums* increase more rapidly, and the varieties may be multiplied and



CYPRIPEDIUM LEVAGATUM



CYPRIPEDIUM SCHROEDERÆ



CYPRIPEDIUM HOOKERÆ

and bearded flowers, with a fierce, warrior-like air that reminds one of Bluebeard. There is a human expression in many of these odd flowers that almost compels one to make some such fanciful comparison or interpretation.

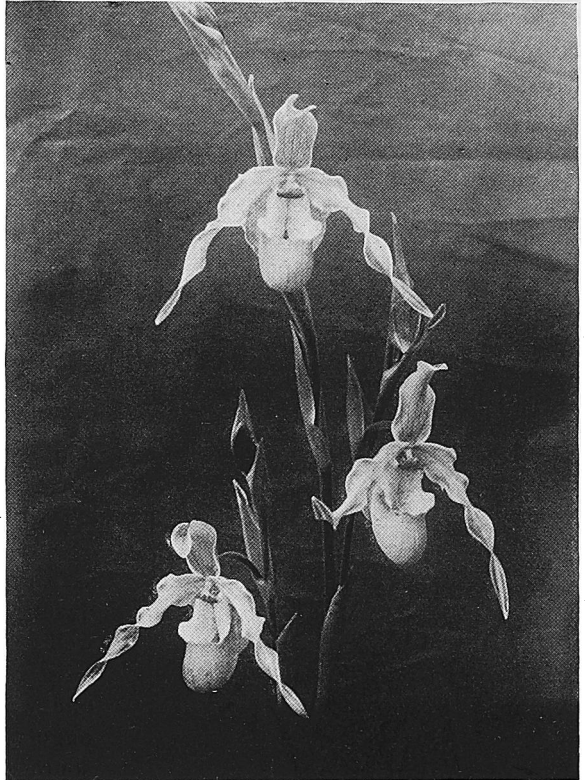
Close beside it, upon the green-house benches, may grow in striking contrast, the dainty, rosy, little blonde belles of the family, *Cypripedium Schlimii*, and *Cypripedium cardinale*, exquisite examples of beauty, both in form and in delicacy of coloring. *Cypripedium bellatulum* and *Cypripedium Godefroyæ* are pale leopard-like little gnomes, that seem to have caught their complexion from the limestone cliffs where they had their birth.

I have sought in vain for the fitness of the name, "Niobe," for the flower to which it belongs. The blossom has a very bright, charming little face, delightfully colored with soft

inter-mixed interminably. It is so fascinating a work to dust one flower with pollen from another, to watch the seeds ripen and germinate, and the traits of the parents gradually appear as the young plants grow, that it is a wonder more persons do not engage in it. What castles in Spain the owner builds while a group of seedlings is in bud! *Cypripedium Harrisianum* was the first artificial hybrid, and its beauty still entitles it to a proud and dignified place as the eldest representative of a family much larger than that of the old woman who lived in a shoe. It blooms twice a year.

Among the plants growing by thousands upon the benches in a large commercial establishment, I once saw three blooms of this species joined together in the dorsal sepal, with the rounded pouches hanging below, like a grotesque chime of bells.

Cypripedium Lawrenceanum, one of the most popular sorts, has wide, defiantly striped

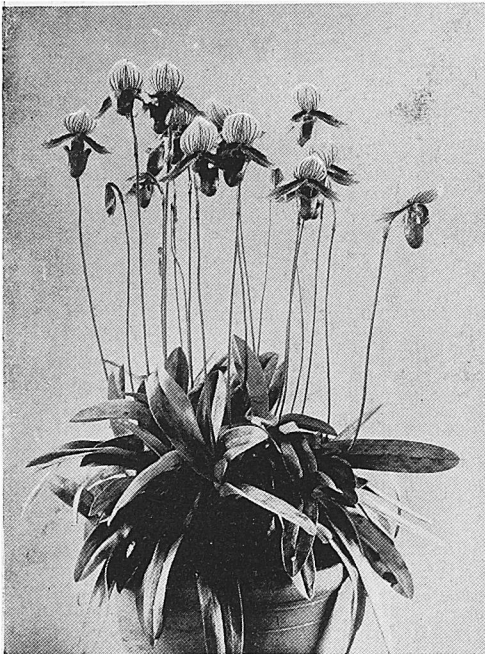


CYPRIPEDIUM CALURUM-ROUGIERI

apple-greens, rich bright browns, violet, white and rose. *Cypripedium Sedeni*, a constant bloomer, and *calurum*, with handsome flowers of deep warm wine-red, are also among the most popular styles of those artificial hybridized varieties which may be termed hand-made Venus-slippers.

But there are other terrestrial orchids, too curious and beautiful to be entirely over-shadowed even by Venus herself. The *Lycaste*, or "monk-orchid," seems likely to have a future as wide as that of the tulips. Of all the tropical orchids it is one of the hardiest in constitution, and perhaps the easiest to cultivate. From deep rose to a tint only less white than the hawthorn, we have a gamut of delicious color-tones, and this in a plant conspicuous for its broad, fine foliage, and glorious in its ample floral garments.

Even still better known, and held in loving remembrance, is the "Dove-orchid" (*Peristeria elata*), called by the Spaniards *el Spirito Sancto*, or flower of the Holy Ghost. The white waxen blossoms are set upon long, rich spikes, and in the centre of each flower nestles a pure white dove. This plant blooms in mid-summer, and in tropical countries is grown like our garden-lilies.



CYPRIPEDIUM BARBATUM-NIGRUM



CYPRIPEDIUM VENUSTUM

Disa grandiflora, the pride of Table Mountain, at the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, is counted the showiest and most beautiful terrestrial orchid yet discovered. It also blooms in mid-summer, and all the fire in the heart of the great wild continent seems aflame in the intense scarlet of its blossoms. They are each three or four inches in diameter, and from one to five are borne upon long stems.

Now all the sorts of terrestrial orchids, many of them as beautiful as these, could not, of course, be dwelt upon in this essay. They are well and fully described in Williams's most complete "Orchid Manual," by one who loved and knew them thoroughly; and there are plenty of other sources of information for the inquiring reader.